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# Trading Well-Being for Economic Efficiency: The 1990 Shift in EU Childcare Policies

Inge Bleijenbergh  
Jet Bussemaker  
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**SUMMARY.** In 1992, the European Union (EU) adopted the Recommendation on Childcare and became involved in childcare policy. For the first time, care services and domestic care were acknowledged as the common responsibility of all the European and national political units. The article shows the interaction between childcare policy at the European level and in three welfare states with strong male breadwinner policy logics: Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (UK). At the European and national levels, arguments prioritizing economic efficiency and equal opportunities gained ground at the expense

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of arguments prioritizing the well-being of children. Formerly male breadwinner states reached a consensus on the policy goal of shared responsibility for caregiving by emphasizing common economic interests and the principle of equal opportunities while still allowing for nation variability in how this policy goal will be carried out. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Childcare policies, European Union, gender equality, Germany, Netherlands, United Kingdom

In 1992, the Council of Ministers of the European Union (EU) introduced the Recommendation on Childcare, committing itself to stimulating the development of childcare services in its member states.<sup>1</sup> It “recommended that Member States should take and/or progressively encourage initiatives to enable women and men to reconcile their occupational, family and upbringing responsibilities arising from the care of children” (Official Journal of the European Communities, 1992a, p. 17). The Recommendation consists of seven articles that formulate common goals on the affordability and accessibility of the services, the introduction of care leaves, the organization of work and the sharing of care responsibilities between men and women. Thought at first glance to be a measure of mere symbolic value, the Recommendation on Childcare illustrated an important conceptual change pertaining to the responsibility of the EU. With this Recommendation, childcare policy (formal day care and out-of-school care and care by recognized host parents) became a topic of EU concern. Still emphasizing the common responsibility of governments, employers, trade unions and families for childcare services, it was the first time European social policy crossed the paid employment nexus and became involved in unpaid as well as paid care.

At the same time in various European welfare states, public childcare became a topic of political concern. This was especially striking in countries with strong male breadwinner policy logics like Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK. Here services were traditionally limited and childcare was considered a private responsibility (Bussemaker, 1998; Lewis, 1997). In this article, we analyze the European policy debates leading to the Childcare Recommendation and the simultaneous de-

bates in Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK. We selected these three countries with strong traditional gender values (male policy logics) and low levels of childcare provision, because we expected the biggest shift to be made in these countries.

In 1989, in the Netherlands and the UK 2% of the children in the 0-3 age group went to public day care; in West-Germany this was 3%. This contrasted with countries with less traditional gender values (moderate or weak breadwinner policy logics) like Denmark and France, that provided public childcare for 44% and 25% of the same age group (Phillips & Moss, 1989). In this article, we examine the arguments used by various political actors in the EU, Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK to support or impede new initiatives on childcare and the political factors that created opportunities for a shift in childcare policy. Did the emerging policy logic at the EU level resemble national policy logics or were there clear differences between the national and supranational levels? What were the contributions of the different countries to the debates leading to the Childcare Recommendation? And how did they implement the Recommendation?

## THEORY

The aim of this article is to demonstrate how assumptions concerning gender relations play a role in the development of European social policy and how social policy at the European and national level interacts. To analyze gender assumptions in national and European social policy, we use the analytical concept of "policy logics." Policy logics are the assumptions, principles and premises of welfare regimes, here especially related to gender (Lewis & Hobson, 1997, p. 6; Sainsbury, 1999). The concept of policy logics emerged from the theoretical pursuit of a welfare typology that does justice to the role of gender assumptions in social policy. Mainstream classifications like Esping-Andersen's (1990) triad of corporatist, liberal and social democrat welfare regimes conceal gender differences within welfare states (Bussemaker & van Kersbergen, 1994; Lewis, 1992; Orloff, 1993). Lewis (1992) and Ostner and Lewis (1995) note that differences in gender assumptions historically cut across mainstream typologies of welfare states. They developed a gender classification focusing on strong, moderate and weak male breadwinner regimes, later redefined as "gender policy logics" (Lewis & Hobson, 1997, p. 2). One of the indicators used in

their classification is the level of social services, particularly with regard to childcare.

### ***Male Breadwinner Policy Logic***

There are “strong” male breadwinner policy logics in Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK, the nations considered here. Ireland is another strong male breadwinner policy state. In these nations, a lack of public childcare services leads to low (mainly part-time) female labor market participation and longstanding inequality between men and women in regard to social security. In the strong breadwinner model countries, there is a firm dividing line between public and private responsibility for caregiving.

“Modified” male breadwinner policy logics are present in societies such as France and Belgium. Such societies are characterized by a moderate level of women’s full-time labor market participation and better social security protection, because women have social protection as either workers or mothers. In these states, the government accepts some responsibility for helping families provide care for children while parents are employed. There are “weak” male breadwinner policy logics in Sweden and Denmark. Here a high level of women’s full-time labor market participation combines with individual tax and social security arrangements, and individual rights to public childcare and parental leave. This is also called the “dual breadwinner policy logic” (Bussemaker 1998; Lewis, 1997; Ostner & Lewis, 1995).

The concepts of welfare regimes and policy logics are not only used to characterize national welfare states, but also to predict the development of European social policy. Ostner and Lewis (1995) argue that the EU would be unwilling to expand into the sphere of care provision because strong male policy logics prevail among the European member states. Moreover, the emphasis on economic integration would prevent the EU from becoming involved in care policy (Plantenga, 1997).

In this article we explain why, in contrast to these expectations, the EU became involved in childcare policy in the 1990s. Moreover, we explain why childcare policies appeared in the same period on the political agenda in three welfare states characterized as having strong male breadwinner policy logics. To describe and explain these developments, we turn to the actors involved in the policy debates and the arguments they used to justify their claims. At the European level, the major actors are the member states in the Council of Ministers and in European institutions such as the European Commission and the European

Parliament. At the national level, the main actors are political parties inside and outside the government. Other actors participate at both levels; for example, the women's movement is organized at the national and European level, as are trade unions and employers' organizations.

## METHOD

Our research method was content analysis of primary and secondary sources on European social policy. We reconstructed the European and national debates on the basis of official documents, archival research, using Departmental archives at the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs, the Hague, and the Archives of the European Communities at the European University Institute in Florence. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with key figures in the policy process and a literature review of secondary sources.

We first reconstructed the policy debates on childcare on the basis of policy documents, periodicals and archival sources. We performed content analysis of the material by organizing the arguments on the issues of inclusion, equality, responsibility and activity. After that, we selected arguments that we intuitively found to be the most outspoken and different from each other. By placing them in chronological order, we revealed the pattern of argumentation in the development of the debate. To enhance the intersubjectivity of the analysis, we presented our reconstruction to a select group of key figures in the policy process on the Childcare Recommendation, allowing them to correct misinterpretations and give additional information. We based our definitive reconstruction on these interviews.

By analyzing the development of the policy debates on childcare, we found three basic arguments on childcare. They include concern for children's well-being, equal opportunities for men and women, and economic efficiency (see also Bussemaker, 1998). Political actors use these arguments to justify different assumptions about the sectors of society primarily responsible for the care of children: the state, the market, non-governmental organizations, or parents. All three lines of reasoning are articulated to either defend or combat the expansion of childcare facilities. First, we discuss and analyze arguments on children's well-being. They might be used to encourage state involvement, claiming that public childcare enhances the development of young children. But arguments on children's well-being might also be used to oppose state

involvement with childcare, claiming that children are best served by being cared for at home by parents.

Second, we elaborate on arguments based on equal opportunities. A reference to equal opportunities may be used to defend female labor market participation and women's economic independence, as well as the collective public responsibility for providing childcare facilities. Equal opportunities may also be used to emphasize fathers' childcare responsibility and thus focus on the sexual re-division of labor at home.

Third, we examine arguments pertaining to economic efficiency. The central concern is whether day care facilities can be expected to keep the welfare state affordable in the long term, for example, by enlarging the labor force in times of low population growth. This argument may be used to emphasize the common responsibility of the state, trade unions and employers to invest in public care facilities. Arguments of economic efficiency may, however, also be used to oppose state investments in childcare. To restrict public expenditure and reduce labor costs, the responsibility may be left to the private sector, emphasizing the individual responsibility of parents and the role of private agencies in civil society. We compared the use of these three arguments during the policy preparation process with the final content of the policy, investigating what arguments came to be dominant and how this can be explained.

## **RESULTS**

We first analyze the European debates on childcare and then compare them with the debates at the national level. The childcare debate began in the 1980s, when a European policy network of women emerged and feminists ("femocrats") came to work at the European Commission and European Parliament (Hoskyns, 1996). The Commission was the first to mention the need for government action in the field of childcare in its first Equal Opportunities Action Programme for 1982-1985 (Commission of the European Communities, 1981). In this period, five Directives on Equal Treatment of Women and Men were developed; European Commission "femocrats" put the topic of childcare on the agenda in an effort to broaden equal treatment policy from labor market policy to the broader field of welfare provisions. On the initiative of its Committee on the Rights of Women, in 1986 the European Parliament joined the European debate on childcare policies. Arguments on children's well-being dominated its contribution. In a resolution on



childcare, the European Parliament stated, "One of the fundamental features of childcare centres is that they provide nursery education for all children, and that this education can offset inequalities experienced by certain socially and culturally disadvantaged groups, giving them a basic level of equal opportunity" (Official Journal of the European Communities, 1986, p. 22).

In the resolution, the European Parliament encouraged state responsibility for care facilities, primarily to increase social equality among children. In particular, the members of the Committee for Women's Rights and the European Socialist Party (the present-day PSE) argued that childcare could be provided by public and private organizations, but the national state should have final responsibility. Access to childcare facilities should be a basic social right and the European Commission should develop a draft Directive on equal access to childcare facilities. These arguments are in keeping with dual caregiver policy logics.

However, opponents to European childcare policy also refer to children's well-being. In the European Parliament, the main opposition is from the Christian Democrats, unified in the European People's Party (PPE). In the debate on the resolution text, Mr. Estgen, a member of the PPE for Luxembourg, argued that children are best cared for by their close relatives. His line of reasoning fits a strong male breadwinner policy logic:

The family provides the most suitable framework for children to grow up in because it is the most natural. That is not a reactionary retreat into Conservative ideology, but an open-minded reaction to scientifically supported findings. Childcare institutions, even at their best, are and always will be a third best solution for very young children. The best is always being cared for by the parents, the second best is being cared for by relatives such as grandparents, and in my view communal social facilities should come only as a last resort." (Debates of the European Parliament, 1986, p. 20)

From this standpoint, the PPE argued against a basic right to childcare facilities and wanted to leave childcare to the family and private companies. The state should financially support these initiatives and have budgetary authority over them. This was a minority standpoint. With an overwhelming majority, the European Parliament adopted a resolution to order the European Commission to present a draft directive on childcare (Official Journal of the European Communities, 1986).

The political climate in the 1980s was, however, not conducive to an expansion of European social policy. Feminists at the European Commission and European Parliament called for action, but the Council of Ministers opposed any expansion of European social legislation. Hedy D'Ancona, former Dutch minister of Welfare, Health and Culture (personal communication, June 16, 1999), claims there was a strong fear of opposition from the Thatcher government. It was probably because of this opposition that in its second Equal Opportunities Programme (1986-1990), the European Commission decided to first build more support for the topic by announcing the foundation of a Childcare Network and not presenting a proposal. The Network with experts from all the twelve member states was asked to examine the situation in each member state and formulate recommendations (Commission of the European Communities, 1985).

Starting in 1987, the Childcare Network was extremely productive in presenting reports on the situation in the various countries. Arguments on behalf of children's well-being dominated their contributions. The reports the Network published in the late 1980s explicitly refer to childcare as a "citizenship right" (European Commission Childcare Network, 1990, p. 2; Moss, 1988, p. 292). Children are not only future citizens, they should be treated as European citizens in their own right. Co-ordinator Peter Moss (personal communication, July 10, 2002) explained that the Childcare Network felt it was society's responsibility to protect children from harm and distress and ensure that their care does not depend on their parents' income, but on their own needs.

Much as the European Parliament did in its 1986 Resolution, the Childcare Network advocated a childcare Directive. Its standpoint on state responsibility was even more explicit. Public authorities should provide equal access to childcare for all children. Leaving childcare to the social partners would exclude children of non-employed parents from its benefits. Moreover, the state should be responsible for the quality of the services and the appropriate wages and working conditions of childcare workers (European Commission Childcare Network, 1990). So based on arguments on children's well-being, the European Parliament and European Commission's Childcare Network both favored public childcare as a central welfare provision to be guaranteed by the state.

In Childcare Network publications from 1988, arguments on equal opportunities for men and women were also prominent. Increasing the number of childcare facilities should contribute to a more equal division of labor between men and women and expand freedom of choice. The

sexual re-division of domestic care responsibilities entered the discussion at this point. In 1990, the Childcare Network explicitly advocated a greater involvement of men in the care of children:

Childcare is a “men’s issue” as much as a “women’s issue.” No formula can be applied uniformly in all families—how responsibilities are shared may vary between families and, within the same family, may vary over time with one parent doing more at one stage and less at another. Having acknowledged this, there is still plenty of scope, and an urgent need, for greater involvement by men in childcare (particularly in families but also as workers in services) and for policies to encourage and support this process. (European Commission Childcare Network, 1990, p. 3)

When the European Commission presented a draft Council Recommendation on Childcare in 1991 (Commission of the European Communities, 1991), the discussion became more pragmatic. Notwithstanding appeals from the European Parliament and its own Childcare Network, the Commission chose to present a draft recommendation instead of a directive. In an official statement to explain this choice, a Commission official referred to the risk of a directive countering the dominant ideas of subsidiarity (Debates of the European Parliament, 1991, p. 365). The Commission obviously didn’t want to face the risk of the United Kingdom using its veto right at the Council of Ministers to block a Childcare Directive, as it did with earlier proposals for directives on parental leave and atypical work (see Rutherford, 1989).

To justify the policy, the European Commission took a less controversial approach than the Childcare Network and European Parliament had in the past. It replaced the argument on behalf of children’s well-being by one on economic efficiency to better suit the EU’s general goal to establish a European market. It stated that a need for women’s growing labor market participation is needed for demographic reasons. In addition, the Commission held that improving the level of childcare facilities in the member states would facilitate the free movement of workers in the labor market.

This argumentation on economic efficiency was supported with references to equal opportunities, but only in a restricted sense. Equal opportunities were interpreted in a one-sided way as opportunities for both sexes to participate in the labor market, but no references were made to the sexual re-division of domestic care responsibilities. Only article 6 mentions the need for increasing men’s participation in caring for chil-

dren. This reference was controversial enough to be the topic of serious debate at the working group preparing the Council of Minister's meetings. The issue was state responsibility to intervene in how care responsibilities were divided at home. The original proposal of the European Commission noted ". . . in relation to the responsibilities arising from the care and upbringing of children, it is recommended that member states promote and encourage increased participation by men to achieve a more equal sharing of parental responsibilities between men and women" (Commission of the European Communities, 1991, p. 17).

The European Parliament proposed making this formulation more concrete (Official Journal of the European Communities, 1991), but at the Council working group, the British opposed this formulation and argued that the division of caring tasks is a family responsibility, not a state one. On the request of the British, a statement was added that men should always have freedom of choice with regard to caring activities. To meet further British objections, the Dutch president proposed adding a sentence to explain that men's care was needed to enable women to participate on the labor market (Departmental archive, Dutch Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs [DAMESA], 1992 the Hague, file aanbeveling 92/241/EEG inzake kinderopvang 31/03/1992). So the Recommendation defended men's care for its instrumental value and no longer for its intrinsic value. The chair of the Council working group at the time, Frank Schumacher, emphasized that this change was supported by the other countries (personal communication, September 10, 2001).

Men's participation in care was a controversial issue in the Council of Ministers, but improving women's participation in the labor market was not, although there was a slight shift in justification. The European Parliament and Economic and Social Committee had been concerned with substantive equality, emphasizing women's growing need to earn their own income due to the rising divorce rate and growing number of single parents (Official Journal of the European Communities, 1991; 1992b). The Council of Ministers combined a more formal approach to gender equality with arguments concerning economic efficiency, emphasizing the growing need for women's labor due to the ageing population. A reference to women's opportunities in the labor market was obviously less controversial than a reference to their economic needs. Female employment was needed to keep the welfare state affordable. Whether or not it gave individual women enough income to support their family was not discussed.

With the growing presence of economic and demographic arguments, the assumptions concerning the role of the state also changed.

References to children's well-being may have promoted state responsibility (as was argued by feminists and Social Democrats in the European Parliament) or the responsibility of the family and civil society (as was argued by Conservatives and Christian Democrats), but with the introduction of economic and demographic arguments, attention shifted to the social partners. Here the British and the Dutch played a role in the Council of Ministers. In the autumn of 1991, the Dutch president of the Council of Ministers proposed responding to the British objections to public responsibility for childcare by putting a greater emphasis on the shared responsibility of national, regional and local governments, social partners, non-governmental organizations and individuals. This change in formulation helped overcome British objections. The German government emphasized the need to guarantee the quality of services, but wasn't supported by the other countries (DAMESA, 1992 the Hague, file *aanbeveling kinderopvang*). References to public quality control and the working conditions of childcare workers were left out of the final recommendation. The Council of Ministers was thus able to adopt the Childcare Recommendation on March 31, 1992.

Though the Recommendation was criticized by feminist authors as being non-binding (Ostner & Lewis, 1995), it could also be seen as a departure from the dominant views at the time on European social policy (see Hoskyns, 1996). Childcare and the division of domestic care were no longer strictly a national affair, but were acknowledged as the common responsibility of all the national and European actors. As Agnes Hubert, the head of the EC Equal Opportunities Unit, noted (personal communication, June 24, 2002):

At the time it was a revolutionary text. It put something on the EU agenda that had never been there before. It was the first time the European Union made an explicit reference to the involvement of fathers in the upbringing of children. And there was something on state and public responsibility for the care for children. Of course the final result was less than the Childcare Network had initially proposed, but we took the Recommendation as fairly progressive, considering the context of the discussion.

In the European debate on childcare, arguments on children's well-being became less important, while references to economic efficiency increased. References to equal opportunities were present throughout the discussion, although the emphasis on the role of fathers in care lost ground because it was given an instrumental rather than a principal

value. In contrast, women's labor market participation was felt to serve a wider goal such as economic and fiscal policies. This shift in argumentation corresponded with a shift in the actors considered responsible for providing services. The single emphasis on the role of either the state (dual breadwinner policy logic) or the parents (male breadwinner policy logic) was replaced by a policy logic on the shared responsibility of the state, social partners, civil society and parents. To legitimize European involvement in childcare policies, it was necessary to emphasize the common responsibility of the various social and political actors.

Let us now examine whether the European childcare policy logic resembles the national policy logics and vice versa. The three welfare states in question are characterized as having strong male breadwinner policy logics (Bussemaker, 1998; Lewis, 1997; Ostner & Lewis, 1995). Historically, public childcare is poorly developed in these countries, and in part as a result, the labor market participation of women is very low. Being welfare states with traditionally limited public involvement with childcare services, why did the issue enter national political agendas in the 1990s? And how did these countries implement the European childcare recommendation?

### *The UK*

In the 1980s and early 1990s, Conservative governments dominated politics in the United Kingdom. The successive Conservative governments, headed by Margaret Thatcher and John Major (1979 -1997), were against state responsibility for childcare. Even the marginal public childcare that existed in the early 1980s became a subject of discussion (Hansard, Col 150, 12-7-1988). Public childcare was among the poorest in Europe and decreased even further (see Moss, 1991). The opposition to traditional family policies was weak. Labor and trade unions held traditional views on childcare based on a male breadwinner ideology and assumptions on the private nature of the family. Moreover, the feminist movement was internally divided on paid work for women and public childcare (Lovenduski & Randall, 1993).

Although the government didn't want to be directly involved, it felt that childcare services would support female labor market participation. It formulated the explicit goal of increasing voluntary and private childcare initiatives (Dwyer, 1998; Land & Lewis, 1998). To support employer involvement in childcare, in 1991 the British introduced tax relief plans for employers who provided workplace nurseries. The effects were limited though because high costs kept employers from pro-



viding the facilities. In addition, the Conservative government tried to stimulate employer childcare initiatives by launching the Opportunity 2000 project. The central aim was to create win-win situations that served the interest of employers and (female) employees alike (Gauthier, 1996). In addition to measures directed at employers, the government wanted to stimulate other private services, like child-minders and nannies. The 1989 Children's Act regulated some of the private initiatives at a minimal level. The Act obliged local authorities to develop systems for registering private services and to provide childcare for children in need (Land & Lewis, 1998).

Up until then, the Conservative government had maintained the emphasis on private responsibility for childcare that it had also advocated at the European level. It feared any European social legislation, and in the preparations for the Childcare Recommendation in the Council working group, it argued that the division of caring tasks is the responsibility of the family, not the state (DAMESA, 1992 file *kinderopvang*). The British argument was successful in changing the proposed emphasis on public responsibility for childcare to a shared responsibility of local and national governments, social partners, non-governmental organizations and individuals. As a result, the recommendation no longer challenged the poor British childcare policies. Nevertheless, the Conservatives began to cautiously recognize some public responsibility for childcare. In the 1992 election campaign, the Conservative government announced that there would be more out-of-school care sites starting in 1993 (Gauthier, 1996). Overall, in the early 1990s, public childcare developed step-by-step in the United Kingdom, usually linked to labor market policy (see O'Connor, Orloff & Shaver, 1999).

The fundamental shift in childcare policy logic occurred in 1997 with the change in political power at the national level. With New Labour in power, public as well as private childcare facilities were expanded. In contrast to the old Labour Party, where the male breadwinner ideology still dominated, New Labour was explicitly committed to gender equality and state support for working women and their families (Sassoon, 1996; Siim, 2000). The Blair government formulated the explicit aim of ensuring free facilities of good quality for all 4-year-olds whose parents wanted them (Land & Lewis, 1998). The Blair government stated that expanding childcare facilities serves both economic efficiency and children's well-being, calling childcare a shared responsibility of the state, the social partners and private agencies. This argument was perfectly in keeping with the approach of the European Childcare Recommendation and resulted in an increase in facilities in the next years.

***The Netherlands***

The turning point in Dutch childcare policy was around 1990, when the expansion of childcare facilities became state policy. Until late into the 1980s, the notion that private care was fundamental to children's well-being dominated the public debate. Public childcare was seen as something immoral in a well-developed welfare state. Mothers were supposed to stay at home and take care of their children. Since the 1970s, the state had only provided part-time playgroups for two- and three-year-olds ("peuterspeelzalen"). Feminists and left-wing parties were the only ones in favor of childcare services as a basic provision.

As in the UK, the Dutch Social Democrats (PvdA) had a longstanding tradition of protecting traditional family and gender relations, and until the late 1980s they had an ambivalent approach towards public childcare. The Christian Democrats (CDA), in power with the Conservative Liberals (VVD) in the 1980s, dominated the political debate on childcare. They advocated a neo-Conservative ideology on the caring society as opposed to state involvement. Christian Democrat Minister of Welfare Elco Brinkman, known for his neo-Conservative ideas on the family, noted that childcare should never become a general public service (Bussemaker, 1997). In his opinion, state-funded childcare embodied the evils of government interference and control in private life as well as the indifference and selfishness of individual citizens who allowed their own interests to prevail over those of their children.

It was only in the late 1980s that the male breadwinner policy logic lost ground in the Netherlands. The implementation of the five European Directives on Equal Opportunities in Dutch social policy made the principle of equal opportunities more influential. A growing consensus emerged on the need for an economic restructuring of the welfare state. Politicians started to defend women's labor market participation with arguments of economic efficiency and to present childcare as a means to increase competitiveness.

This development can be explained by two factors. First, in 1989 a new Cabinet of Social Democrats and Christian Democrats came into power. The Social Democrats, like Labour in the UK, argued that public childcare might contribute to children's well-being and equal opportunities for men and women. Entering the Cabinet, they were able to influence the policy process. Secondly, a report by the influential Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR, 1990) provided arguments to legitimate public childcare to other political parties as well. It noted that women's labor market participation should be stimulated to ensure wel-



fare provisions such as pensions in the long run. Childcare was an important requirement in this connection. It was no longer the division of responsibility between the family and the state that was the issue, but the shared responsibility of employees, companies and the state.

The new coalition of Christian Democrats and Social Democrats developed the first Dutch policy program to increase childcare, the Stimulation Measure, in 1990. It introduced financial support for public and private services. Since then, childcare has become a booming business in the Netherlands. In particular, the historically unique coalition Cabinet of Liberals (VVD and D66) and Social Democrats (1994-2002) made the expansion of childcare arrangements an important policy goal. To stimulate companies setting up their own childcare facilities, in 1995 the Cabinet introduced tax incentives for employers. It argued financing childcare should be a shared responsibility of the state, employers and trade unions. Under the influence of European legislation, the Cabinet also developed legislation on unpaid parental leave and introduced fiscal measures to establish paid parental leave.

Thus arguments on economic efficiency, strategically combined with arguments on equal opportunities for men and women, dominated the Dutch public debate on childcare in the 1990s. The post-1990 expansion of childcare facilities was more an effect of alterations in labor market policy and the need for fiscal restructuring than of co-ordinated policy on gender equality. In this respect, Dutch social policy was in keeping with the changes in the European childcare debate, advocating policy logics of economic efficiency.

## *Germany*

Like the Netherlands, Germany witnessed a turning point around 1990 in the public childcare debate, though for very different reasons. Germany's reunification in 1989 suddenly confronted it with two very different childcare systems. Former Communist East Germany had ample state facilities for childcare, but in West Germany public facilities were very rare and only supplemented by a few private efforts on the part of the parents themselves.

As in the Netherlands, a strong male breadwinner policy logic prevailed in West Germany in the 1970s and 1980s. The argument that children were best cared for at home by their mothers dominated the public debate. The Conservative Cabinets in the 1980s dominated by the Christian Democrats (CDU and CSU) saw little reason to question this approach. The only policy instrument which rose sharply in the

1970s, public subsidies to host parents (“Tagesmütter”), declined in the early 1980s (Ergas, 1990).

It was only after German unification in 1989 that childcare became an important political issue. The government had to face the challenge of combining two totally different systems into one. Christian-Democrats did not want the expansion of public childcare to be linked to totalitarianism, state control or state education, as they described the East German situation. As the CDU stated in a pamphlet:

It was socialist but not social to wake small children from their sleep at five in the morning and transport them in crowded vehicles to institutions (“Einrichtungen”). At all these institutions . . . children were exposed to a one-sided ideological model of control. (CDU, *Die Sozialpolitische Entwicklung in Deutschland-Familien Förderung*, date unknown)

In 1991 the Christian-Democrat government introduced a new Federal Act on Children and Youth Support (“Kinder-und Jugendhilfegesetz”). One of its aims was to create a comprehensive and coherent system of facilities for children in the 0-6 age group, regulating day care centers, kindergartens, out-of-school care facilities and childminders. The Act facilitated procedures for becoming a childminder, devoting attention to the educational value of childcare. The basic argument for increasing childcare was not economic efficiency, but children’s well-being and a balanced family life. Men and women should decide freely whether or not they wanted a career. In a debate about the new Act in 1991, Bundeskanzler Köhl spoke in terms of a right to childcare, although he noted it should always be a free choice:

We want every person, male or female, to be able to choose freely between family and a career or a combination of the two. Therefore, . . . public childcare facilities and other forms of childcare should increase. The German government will really do its best to secure a right to childcare in the Law on Children and Youth Support. (Verhandlungen 1990-1991, vol. 155, 12/5, p. 81)

When Kohl made this statement in the Bundestag, members of some political parties broke out laughing. However, a year later they all backed the new regulation. The Act on Children and Youth Support committed the German state to guarantee public childcare for all children in the 3-6 age group at nursery schools (“Kindergartens”), to take

effect in 1996 (European Commission Childcare Network, 1996). Because not all the *Länder* [states] were able to implement the new law, in 1996 a transitional measure was to go into effect until 1999 (Ditch, 1996).

To a far greater extent than the Dutch and British debate, the political debate in Germany echoed the arguments of the European Parliament and European Childcare Network on childcare as a basic right for parents and children. With the historical presence of public childcare services in parts of the republic, arguments on the well-being of children were relatively important. This also explains the German position in the Council of Ministers, emphasizing the quality of services rather than the majority argument of economic efficiency (DAMESA, 1992).

The Children and Youth Support Act represented a major step in German childcare policy. Under a Christian-Democrat Cabinet, Germany created a basic right to childcare. Apart from Bavaria, all the *Länder* accepted this right. In 1993 there was also a gradual expansion of partly paid parental leave to 36 months. Combining work and family life gradually reached a higher position on the German political agenda.

The three strong male breadwinner states started important changes in their childcare policies in the early 1990s. In all three cases, welfare state restructuring and the influence of European equal opportunities policies helped make childcare a topic of public policy. In addition, specific political factors played a role. In Germany the reunification process put childcare on the political agenda. In the Netherlands the entrance of Social Democrats in the Cabinet pushed for change. In the United Kingdom the threat of a demographic time bomb put childcare on the political agenda. In the UK as well as the Netherlands, the expansion of childcare under the Conservatives and Christian Democrats (in the Netherlands in coalition with Social Democrats) was combined with more (the UK) or less (the Netherlands) market-driven provisions. In Germany, a Christian Democrat Cabinet introduced a basic right to childcare and generous paid parental leave. Here the rather atypical emphasis of Christian Democrats on public childcare was the result of a specific historical situation, the reunification of East and West Germany.

The changes in the European debate on childcare were reflected in the shifts in national policy logics. In all three countries, arguments concerning the well-being of children and a traditional gender ideology dominated social policy in the 1970s and 1980s. It was not until the end of the 1980s that arguments concerning equal opportunities and combining work and family life emerged. In the Netherlands and the UK,

they were combined with references to economic efficiency. Childcare facilities could facilitate the female labor market participation that was needed to compensate for the ageing population, as was noted by advisory boards. In Germany concerns for children's well-being remained relatively important, combined with references to equal opportunities (a legacy from East Germany and EU policy). So, in the 1990s, in all three countries political debates showed a shift from a male breadwinner policy logic towards a policy logic of shared responsibility for caregiving. It would take a decade longer before the policy became effective.

### DISCUSSION

The 1992 EU Childcare Recommendation represents a shift in the European policy debate on childcare. The Council of Ministers replaced arguments concerning the well-being of children, introduced by the European Parliament and the European Childcare Network, with arguments concerning economic efficiency and equal opportunities in the labor market. This shift was also expressed in the policy debates at the national level. In the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Germany there was growing pressure to expand public childcare from social and political actors (political parties, especially left-wing ones, trade unions, employers and women's groups) and from intellectuals (advisory boards or networks of experts). However, the forces for change were very different in the individual states. In the UK, strong Labour opposition and the demographic need for women's labor market participation, an effective argument for employers, were important factors stimulating public and private childcare. In the Netherlands, the Social Democrats in the Cabinet in 1989 pushed for change, supported by arguments on economic efficiency. German reunification confronted the country with two different systems of childcare, stimulating the government to formulate a new starting point for childcare and youth policy. Here references to children's well-being were used to replace the extensive collective childcare services of the former East German regime by a more voluntary right to public childcare.

So in the three member states, there were pushes for change from below. There was also pressure from above, from the European level. In the EU, there was a strong feminist call for equal opportunities at the European Parliament and European Commission. In the 1970s and 1980s, equal treatment policies had a legitimizing function in the project of European integration. With the transition to a common European

Market in 1992, political pressure to develop European social policy increased. The formulation of common policy aims on childcare at EU level reconciled common economic interests (demographic changes and the need for shaping an internal market), the need for equal opportunities for men and women and space for variety. The policy logic advocating shared responsibility of employers and trade unions, governments and families for childcare linked perfectly to the logic of European economic integration.

Our analysis reveals interesting similarities between the debates in states with former male breadwinner logics and the EU. There is a clear interdependence between the policy logics on childcare at the national and the European levels. It is difficult to say which direction the influence goes. The member states still seem to dominate the development of European social policy. The opposition of one member state, the UK, changed plans for a Childcare Directive into a less perilous Recommendation. But, notwithstanding the absence of legal force, after the Recommendation public involvement in childcare in three countries with formerly strong male breadwinner policy logics grew. The most striking growth was visible in the UK. By 2000, in the United Kingdom, 34% of children in the 0-3 age group were in formal childcare. In the same period in Germany and the Netherlands formal childcare provision increased to 10% and 6%<sup>2</sup> (OECD, 2001, p. 144). The focus on economic integration did not prevent European social policy from covering the issue of caregiving, as had been predicted (Ostner and Lewis, 1995). On the contrary, the need for women's labor market participation came to be the main justification for European involvement in childcare. Common pressure from social and political actors in the member states and feminist actors at European institutions forced a break in the dominant conception of European social policy (see Bleijenbergh, 2004).

European involvement in childcare was to be further expanded a decade later when European member states formulated clear target figures for the expansion of childcare in Barcelona in 2002. By 2012, 33% of all children in the age group 0-3 should be in formal childcare (European Commission, 2002)

Our results are in keeping with the explanation of earlier unexpected developments in European social policy based on common efforts of actors inside and outside EU institutions (Hoskyns, 1996; Vleuten, 2002). The acknowledgement of the common responsibility of political actors, social partners and non-governmental actors is also in line with Falkner's argument that the process of European integration came to ex-

hibit a more corporatist pattern in the 1990s (Falkner, 1998). The 1992 Childcare Recommendation anticipated a new phase in European social policymaking. The Maastricht Treaty, signed several months later, confirmed a greater involvement of social partners and national political actors in the development of European social policy. Although emphasizing shared responsibility with member states, social partners, non-governmental organizations and parents, the Childcare Recommendation first shows EU responsibility for childcare provision. And although stimulating men's role in childcare is only defended for instrumental reasons, the Recommendation also exhibits a historically new involvement in the sexual re-division of tasks in the private sphere.

## NOTES

1. The then twelve member states of the EU were Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom. Since then the EU has widened to 25 countries.
2. The Dutch figure refers to 1998 instead of 2000.

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